DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 238 FL 019 990

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TITLE Grammar: Should the Skeleton Stay in the Closet?
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Grammar; Higher Education; High Schools; *Language Proficiency; Language Teachers; *Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Sentence Structure; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The task of teaching grammar in language courses is difficult because many American students lack a thorough grounding in the structure of their own language that could serve as a model framework for learning the grammar of another. It is helpful therefore for language teachers to stress parallel structures in the two languages, and to introduce grammar as early as the first day or two of class. No progression can take place without the tools that grammar provides. Although the particular instructional needs change with the learner's level, they do not end after 2 years of study. In order to progress towards mastery, grammar must play a part in all language activities on all levels. Various ways are suggested for facilitating grammar learning and strategies for reinforcement appropriate to different levels, without losing sight of the fact that grammar is only the skeleton. (LB)

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ABSTRACT

Grammar: Should the Skeleton Stay in the Closet?

How to be a spectacularly unpopular language teacher? Declare your undying commitment to grammar and insist on teaching it. It goes without saying that putting it this simply and confrontationally would be suicidal and conducive only to emptying classrooms. It is equally obvious, however, that a case for grammar is about to be made.

The question then is one of strategy and stamina. The task itself is all the more daunting since American students, typically, lack a thorough grounding in the structure of their own language which should serve as a model framework for assembling the skeleton of another. It seems helpful, therefore, especially during the first year, to stress parallel structures in the two languages, not only to create this awareness but also to minimize the fear of the unknown. Retrospectively, students invariably remark on their new understanding of the mechanics of English as a side benefit.

It may be a heretical notion that grammar should be introduced on day one or, at the latest, on day two. It may dampen the excitement of finding oneself communicating after learning a few simple phrases but, alas, there is no progression beyond that without the tools to create it. Language is not an amorphous mass and serves its function of conveying specific meanings only if manipulated according to its own rules.

While the particular instructional needs change with the learner's level, they do not end after two years. In order to progress towards mastery, grammar has to play a part in all language activities, on all levels. This paper suggests various ways of facilitating grammar learning and strategies for reinforcement appropriate to different levels, without losing sight of the fact that grammar is, after all, only the skeleton.

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Grammar: Should the Skeleton Stay in the Closet?

While there are several more enjoyable and seemingly more rewarding facets of our teaching on which to dwell, few intrude as persistently upon our daily task as the matter of grammar. Even those of us who are totally convinced of its efficacy find our missionary fervor flagging when confronted with student apathy, not to mention overt aversion. In many, the distaste is deeply rooted in their early misadventures in grammar learning in the native tongue, a fact that presents us with a twofold problem: a lack of understanding of grammatical concepts and, as a result, apprehension of having to learn them in another language. These problems, not necessarily confined to a particular level, unfortunately dog some students throughout their native and foreign language learning career and prevent progress beyond a certain limited level of written and oral expression in both. For some, fortunately, the learning of German grammar becomes the Schlüsselerlebnis and, for us as the key makers, one of our more rewarding experiences. At one time or another, all of us have been told by students that they had never learned as much of their own language and grammar as when they began to understand the German structure. Without realizing it, they had always been frustrated by the seeming difficulties of language, unable to manipulate it into serving them with clarity and precision of expression. Would that one could procure this type of testimonial from one of their peers for the first day of every language class!

Having scanned untold first, second and third year textbooks in an everlasting effort to find the best approach to grammar, I have found two main types: those which openly confess to the importance of it and present it accordingly, and those which try to apologize for its existence, with few attempts at compromise in between. Granted that there are a number of considerations when choosing a text, but the method of and emphasis on the presentation of grammar is my highest priority, especially for years one and two. All of us have a wealth of material on hand to provide a variety of stimulating, supplementary activities, yet we should be able to rely on the text to present the structure in a clear, well-organized, logical progression, accessible to the students and accompanied by a variety of exercises in contemporary idiom, not adolescent slang. Vocabulary and reading selections should not be accidental to the grammar discussed but carefully chosen to support it and to match the level of difficulty. Glossy pages of splendid photographs and eye-catching ads and drawings are a bonus but not a substitute for substance. Thus, some of the more attractive and expensive texts may not meet some of our most substantive

requirements. I have therefore often found it more useful, especially on the second year level, to have a no-frills, bare-bones, well-structured review grammar which I supplement with an annotated reader of contemporary literature. Occasional video-or slide presentations may take the place of, or even be an improvement over, the glossy photos. However, on rare occasions, supply and demand meet, and there is a book to fulfill nearly all of one's wishes. It should, in my opinion, never be one that downplays grammar and tells the student to be 'aware' of it but not to attempt to memorize anything--students already know how not to do that! I am currently using the latter kind--for want of choice--and have to implement a grammar teaching method of my own. To pretend memorization--one of the teachers stock-in-trade dirty words--is outmoded and unnecessary is simply unrealistic. The how of memorization may be another matter, depending largely upon the individual students and a few helpful hints from us, such as Eselsbrücken (if you can say, wer brauchen ohne zu gebraucht, braucht brauchen überhaupt nicht zu gebrauchen, you are not likely to forget it). Or, as Karen Kunkel Ready suggests in, "Teaching Grammar Through Music," by using familiar tunes to memorize pronouns, reflexives and prepositions. (Die Unterrichtspraxis, 1989, #2, pp.184,5). While effective and enjoyable, this method has its limitations. To make memorizing easier, one may want to point out the advantages of learning short lists, i.e. the few inseparable prefixes and the few coordinating conjunctions. I also point out the efficacy of learning the feminine noun suffixes to better the odds of noun gender guessing. Memorization comes more easily to some students than to others but a degree of tedium is undeniable. To date, however, I have had only one student who, after failing one vocabulary quiz after another, offered to bring a statement from a psychologist to the effect that he was incapable of memorization. He dropped German and became a successful drama major who starred in many productions.

Most students who eventually want to master the second language are exposed to its grammar at least three times, and I find almost invariably in teaching the second year that the first go-around (two years of high school or one year of college) left little trace but, worse yet, that this may, to some extent, also be the case on the advanced grammar and composition level, usually the students' last brush with language structure. It is here that I make a desparate, last-ditch attempt to leave an indelible impression. The big advantage at this point is, of course, that the students no longer need be sold on the idea, but implementation is still far from easy. Aside from a systematic review which

which includes some of the fine points not previously covered, there are a variety of written grammar exercises and compositions, all of which I carefully check and return without corrections. The errors are underlined and coded--w.o. for word order--and, an obvious incentive for the students, are not graded until corrected. The most common mistakes are discussed in class, and every now and then, the results are gratifying: new mistakes appear instead of the old ones. On all levels, I find punctuation to be the major culprit in word order problems. Prepositional phrases, separated by comma in English are, of course, not in German. Misplacing a comma would be a minor offense, even to the purist, if it were not for the resulting word order mayhem. On the face of it, this seems easy to explain and correct, but I have found this problem to be most resistent to my efforts, despite the fact that the students have to correct that error time and again. It is my conclusion that having several kinds of word order different from the English is even more difficult to master than, for instance, adjective endings, cases and gender. For that reason, I nearly always interject word order corrections in oral presentations while I am reluctant to interrupt students for other, more minor mistakes. This is done as much for the listeners' as for the speaker's sake, and I do not subscribe to the theory that correcting will inhibit speaking. It is, in fact, a frequent student complaint that native speakers fail to correct them, and I would maintain that corrections are helpful and appropriate even after a good level of fluency has been achieved.

In this context, problems arising from fluency acquired in a non-academic environment should be mentioned. Chauncy J. Mellor in, "Teaching tools for the classroom: A Suggestion for Teaching and Testing at the Advanced Level," (Die Unterrichtspraxis, 1988, #2, pp. 212-214) calls it street-type as opposed to ~~school~~ school-type learning and notes that pronunciation is usually passable to good, the vocabulary extensive but the grammar weak. I would agree to all of the above but find because there is little awareness of grammatical structure, speaking ability does not develop beyond a certain, unsophisticated level and writing is a greater problem still. Generally, a student of such background becomes frustrated and resistant to further grammar instruction. He simply rejects the idea that his command of the language is lacking. He bases the assessment of his skills on two observations; he can be understood readily, and he is not corrected. The most extreme such case in my teaching experience was an American singer who had been living and working in Austria for a number of years. When she enrolled in my class for intermediates--singers like herself--she said

she had never had any formal instruction in the language and felt she should finally learn to speak it properly instead of just stringing nouns and infinitives of verbs together. After a week of classes, she had convinced herself that it would not be worth the effort since people usually understood her and appreciated her attempts to communicate.

In order to put grammar into its proper, real-life context, I include on all tests from the intermediate level on upward a page from a short story, a fairy tale or a magazine article. The students have to underline, circle or check all examples of grammar points covered on that test, such as weak and strong adjective endings, two-way or other prepositions, modals, subjunctive forms, etc. Most of the students find this more difficult than other, traditional parts of the test, such as rewriting sentences in another tense or changing from indicative to subjunctive. To me, this explains, at least in part, the problems students have in applying grammar, abstractly learned, in their writing and speaking. It convinces me of the necessity of such exercises since they may accomplish what memorization does not. A case in point is the difficulty with strong and mixed verbs and modals. I found principal-parts-of-verbs quizzes alone not to be nearly the incentive for learning the verb list as also having to identify these verbs in their various forms in a text. However, despite all such efforts, students with a good short-term memory may find themselves relearning their verbs on each successive level. Yet, this should not discourage us from our chief purpose: to be the best facilitators we can be.

Although my teaching experience has been confined to working with college students, I find it compares closely with that of my high school colleagues, after allowing for the age/maturity factor. This observation was confirmed by and article of John F. Lalande's, "Inquiries into the Teaching of German Grammar," (Die Unterrichtspraxis, 1990, #1, pp. 30-41), based on an investigation he conducted involving eleven high school German teachers and 219 students from various schools in the State of Illinois selected by them. A teacher's questionnaire revealed that only 36% considered their training in grammar better than satisfactory, 55% satisfactory and 9% poor. Less than half of the teachers responded affirmatively to whether or not they were continuing with their formal education in grammar. Burn-out and lack of evening classes were the main reasons for not doing so. In their classrooms, most of the teachers viewed grammatical

accuracy as not so important. Regarding their students grammatical performance, only one was very satisfied, eight were satisfied, two less than satisfied. One teacher thought too little class time was spent on grammar, six thought the time appropriate and four excessive. Yet 72% stated that they would like to spend more time doing other things in class. 45% felt that students learned grammar and rules easily to very easily. 82% usually presented grammar rules in English, only one teacher gave the explanations in German. It may be assumed that the latter was the only native speaker in this group. Even more informative than the teachers' survey was the one involving the 219 students, ranging in age from 15 (49%) to 17 or above (15%) Their previous year grades in English were 48% As, 38% Bs, 12% Cs and 2% Ds. It was noted at this point that German courses had a higher proportion of above-average students than French and Spanish courses, an oservation I share. 191 students responded affirmatively when asked whether it is important to know a foreign language, eleven negatively, eight did not know and nine had no answer. Only 3% of the students preferred grammar explanations to be given exclusively in the foreign language, a result that tallies closely with my own findings. The three most frequent responses to "What does grammar in foreign language instruction mean to you?" were, in order, lots of memorization, good grades, and an aid toward speaking. Some comments in favor of more grammar were: "In order to speak well, you need to know your grammar," or, "Grammar is the most important part of the language," and, "To be more fluent in the language." Only two schools, one urban and one rural, were opposed to the idea of more grammar, the most adamant statement being, "We need to talk now and talk grammatically later. Once we have a grip on vocabulary, we can perfect grammar." However, most of the 59% who preferred more grammar seemed to equate linguistic with communicative competence. Most students found memorization the best method for internalizing grammar. It was also found that students still devote more time to vocabulary acquisition than to the development of other language skills. Despite much advocacy from pedagogues for practicing the language outside the classroom, few students actually do. In my experience, the opportunities and setting for such practice are rarely available, even on most college campuses. Ideally, a native speaker the students' own age should be on hand for informal discussions or for language tables. If learners attempt to converse with each other in the language, it is not only an artificial situation, it also tends to reinforce incorrect speech patterns without increasing vocabulary. In conclusion, the author remarks that grammar, indeed, continues to occupy a position of central importance in foreign language instruction. He also casts

doubt on a statement by Tracy Terrell in his recent publication, "A Natural Approach to Second Language Acquisition and Learning" (Modern Language Journal 61 pp. 325-37), "The role of grammar instruction in a foreign language class has changed drastically in the last four years...from grammar translation to communicative approaches." The Illinois study shows that Terrell's assumptions may be false. Teachers want to adopt a communicative approach but have not. Syllabi remain grammar-driven; grammar is still the name of the game. None of the teachers in the study subscribed to a comprehension-based or a "natural" approach to the teaching of German. The author of the study merely speculates on reasons for this phenomenon and considers further investigation desirable. Heidi Byrnes in an article entitled, "Whither Foreign Language Pedagogy: Reflections in Textbooks--Reflections on Textbooks,"(Unterrichtspraxis, 1988, #1, pp. 29-36), discusses as the most important development in recent years the trend toward functional language use and its most apparent result, a downgrading of grammar. While she accepts this , she hastens to add her own positive definition of grammar as "summarizing the way in which we can express an infinity of meanings through a finite set of rules." If such be our understanding of grammar, she maintains, downgrading it is a highly questionable procedure. Perhaps we should remind ourselves, she continues, that the relation between meaning and form, between our thoughts and communicative intentions and the way we express them is the oldest motivation for the study of grammar.

While we may not all agree on the amount of attention grammar should receive in our daily teaching, we must confront it and dispense it on all levels. Our own positive attitude will, we can hope, be reflected in that of the students and lead them to regard conquering German grammar as just one of their many intellectual challenges. When I praise good writing--and I never fail to do so--I never tire of pointing out how much the student's command of grammar has contributed to his fine work. I see no reason for trying to disguise the fact that I am teaching grammar and find texts that attempt to soft-pedal it tedious, not to say dishonest. Without the skeleton, that indispensable structure, language would be nothing but an amorphous mass of words, out of control and devoid of meaning.

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